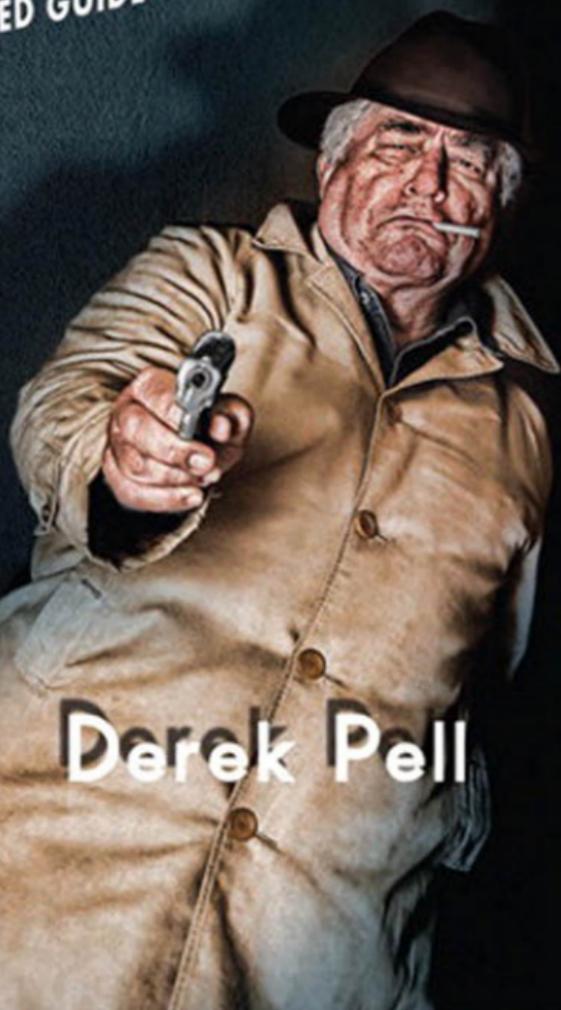




# SHOOT TO THRILL

A HARD-BOILED GUIDE TO DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY



Derek Pell

## **Shoot to Thrill: A Hard-Boiled Guide to Digital Photography**

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE F STOPS HERE

*"It was his story against mine, but of course I told my story better."*

—Humphrey Bogart (*In a Lonely Place*: 1950)

Nobody move—you're surrounded.

Must be a couple hundred books on digital photography starin' at you. They've all got slick covers, pretty pictures, acknowledgements stretching from here to eternity, technical data, and buzzwords like "workflow." (Whenever I hear that word, I reach for my gun.) You got books written by pro photographers, teachers, technocrats, gadget hacks, computer wizards, maybe a writer or two.

Well, you can bet the farm on this: None were authored by a fiction writer with a case of the hard-boiled, how-to blues. That's no compliment, just the facts.

There's nothin' but sunny-side-up on the subject, packed with enough smiley faces to wallpaper every dentist's office in North America. Believe me, I've read 'em all. I've even learned stuff, too, despite the cloying, *have a nice day* tone. It's enough to make me hit the bottle, but then any excuse'll do. (Truth be told, I'm self-uneducated, and everything I know I got by reading or making mistakes.) Only a few of these books deserve the tag "inspiring," like Joe McNally's *The Moment It Clicks*, David duChemin's *Within the Frame*, and Julie Blackmon's *Domestic Vacations*. The latter is just photos and an interview, but this dame's work is so spectacular it could prod a mob boss to start shootin'. Pictures, that is.

So what's up with the book you're holdin' now?

You've wandered into some strange new territory. Mean streets after hours, where jazz and noir are swirling, and mysteries drift like the smoke from a discharged 6-shot .38 special snub nose. (Thanks for the heat, Chris.) You've stepped smack in the middle of a genre without a name.

Private Eye-Fi? SLR-Noir? Shutterbug Pulp? Call it whatever you want—I'll leave the labels to critics and keep the bottle for myself. Suffice to say, I come to the table with a loaded gun, a loaded cam, and a loaded '40s attitude. And when I finish this bottle of bourbon, I'll be fully loaded.

Hell, to make it through these tough times, you need street smarts and indestructible gear; you need vision (yours, not mine) and a hard-boiled sensibility. Look at it this way—you could do a lot worse. At least this book gives you more slang for your buck.

I started out as a writer and visual artist, not a photographer. First, I wrote poetry that coulda put Ezra Pound to sleep. Then I tossed the meter and veered off that rarefied road into the untamed wilds of satire (*National Lampoon*). I soon lost my appetite for spite and retreated to the distant realm of literary fiction. When I grew bored, I turned to manual labor: collage, mixed media, book objects, and multiples.

Then came a brainstorm: a how-to book on suicide. I was sick to death of reading about *attempted* suicides. Why the hell couldn't people get it right the first time? A primer was called for, so I wrote one—a how-to to end all, literally. Alas, the book wound up killing its publisher. Now that would've stopped most writers in their tracks, but not me. I don't know the meaning of the word *quit*. I went on to write a whole series of self-help books. One, a guide for new parents,\* was chosen as a "New and Noteworthy" title by *The New York Times Book Review*. (Go figure, I didn't even have kids.) Would've been a feather in my fedora had they not referred to me as "...a British misanthrope-humorist." I'd never stepped foot in the UK, although some of my best friends were brats.

Okay, so what's all this literary crap got to do with digital photography? Nothing. And everything.

Since I'm the son of a photographer, you might assume I gravitated to the camera at an early age. I didn't. In fact, I had virtually no interest in the medium when I was growin' up. It was simply what somebody

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\**Doktor Bey's Book of Brats*

in our house did. When the classic movie *Blow-up* came out, kids came up to me and said: “Your old man’s a photographer—*cool!*”

That’s not the way I saw it. My dad snapped pictures of Mr. Clean, Coke, Jaguars. Big deal. But then one day we were walking through Grand Central Station where, above the big archway, was a billboard-sized Kodak display featuring a breathtaking color shot of downhill racers. He pointed up at it and said, “That’s my photograph.”

*Cool...*

My photography came much later, purely by accident, and I reveal the sordid details in the Prologue. The question here is why I wrote this book. I wanted to write the first technical book that reads like a novel. (Go ahead, kill a guy for tryin’.) No, this book is intended—in its own peculiar way—to inspire you to take pictures you’ve only dreamed about—to explore your own concepts, create visual stories, and capture shots that’ll thrill you and everyone around you. I want you to make art with a camera and be fearless in the process.

All of us—amateur and pro alike—take lots of shots destined for the ash heap. It goes with the territory, just as writers slam-dunk crumpled pages and painters paint over their canvases. Yet, as photographers, we strive each day to make a picture that deserves to be framed.

If you can imagine a photo you haven’t shot, and the image in your mind excites you, you’re halfway there.

Come inside. I’ve got a few stories to tell that are stranger than fiction. They just might change the way you see.

Derek Pell  
San Diego, 2009

**Author’s Note:** I shot most of the photos in this book with a Nikon D90 and refer to its nomenclature. With the exception of the camera’s video capability, similar features are found on all recent D-SLRs, so non-Nikon shooters shouldn’t feel excluded.

# PROLOGUE

## I COVER THE WATERGATE

### From Nixon to Nikon

*“He’s the quiet sort, and yet you get a feeling if you step out of line you’d get your teeth kicked down your throat.”—Born to Kill (1947)*

I was hanging around waiting for the big cheese to show. Turns out the chief law enforcement officer in the land was on the wrong side of the law. He’d dipped his hand in some very nasty business and was front page news in every paper in the country. The attorney general of the United States, John Mitchell, was starting to look like just another crook—a common bagman in cahoots with a gang of burglars bent on heisting the U.S. Constitution.

Mitchell was a pipe-sucking thug with an impenetrable, glassy-eyed gaze. He had the smuggest mug I’d ever seen. Of course, I’d never seen him in the flesh, just in newspapers and on TV.

As the Watergate scandal raged, Mitchell’s wife Martha started hitting the booze and phoning reporters in the dead of night, hinting she might spill the beans on her hubby and other higher-ups, but feared for her life. Somebody was out to get her... wanted to shut her up for good. She was dismissed by some as just “a crazy drunk” and became the butt of jokes on the late-night talk shows. Others believed she was on the verge of a mental breakdown, trapped in a nightmare because of what she knew.

As it turned out, Watergate would be a nightmare for us all.

The year was 1973, and Washington, DC was awash in paranoia. It was like the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. You never knew who might turn out to be a pod. People were scared, didn’t know who to trust. Rumors swirled around the city like a San Francisco fog. The president, they whispered, had gone off the deep end... was wandering the White House corridors after hours, talking to

himself. Every day the headlines grew bolder, screamed new accusations. Big names in the Nixon administration were dropping like flies. And John Mitchell was a biggie.

My job: nail the AG for posterity with a borrowed SLR and a 135mm lens duct-taped to the body.

I wasn't killing time alone in the Senate Caucus Room. The joint was packed with spectators, SRO. A pool TV crew was cooling their Klieg lights, while I stood out like a sore thumb, a tinhorn tourist in a pack of pros. The top White House Press shooters were there—legends all, like Wally McNamee of *Newsweek* and George Thames of *The New York Times*. The wires were present too, of course, AP and UPI, and me... a kid who'd never taken a picture in his life, except with a Polaroid "Swinger."

When I'd first shown up at the hearings weeks before as John Dean was being sworn in, one pro eyed the beat-up Nikon hanging around my neck and turned to another: "Who's the kid with the Mickey Mouse camera?" A burst of gruff laughter burned my ears. My face flushed red.

Good thing I ain't thin-skinned, or I'd have high-tailed it out of Dodge with my tail between my legs. Instead, I took it on the chin.

So what the hell was I doing there, you're probably asking yourself.

I was, in fact, assigned to cover the Senate Watergate Hearings as a writer, not a photographer. I was freelancing for a rag called *Crawdaddy*. Only problem was the magazine couldn't get me press credentials because they weren't considered "mainstream." Thus, I was on my own. It was kind of like landing a plum assignment to cover the Super Bowl from the parking lot. Because the Watergate scandal was one of the biggest in history, every reporter in the country (not to mention hundreds of foreign press) wanted to be in that room. Space was extremely limited, and they were operating on a rotating basis. With the exception of the major print organizations, the wire services, and TV reporters who were granted daily access, the rest of the press could only get a one- or two-day pass and that

was it. So, if you worked for the *St. Louis Dispatch* or the *Bloomington Gazette*, you'd get a tiny window of opportunity without knowing who'd be testifying and that was that. Wham-bam. Next!

How I managed to finagle press credentials for the entire summer is a story punctuated by a blast of sucker's luck and mistaken identity. Having grown up in Westport, Connecticut, I knew a dame who headed an organization there called the World Affairs Center—a leftist peace group active in the antiwar movement. It was influential locally, but not a publication. I asked the lady if she'd scrawl a note saying I was covering the hearings for them. She said sure. So I hopped a train to DC, marched into the Press Office, and tossed my note to the sap in charge. He consulted a clipboard, scratched his buzzcut, then handed me a one-week pass and informed me I'd have to return each week to renew it.

I managed to constrain my reaction to a curt nod and a "Thanks, pal..." but once outside I leapt in the air and clicked my heels. Yeah, it was like a bad scene in a Broadway musical, but I was stoked.

How in the hell had I gained access reserved for the top echelon of journalism? To this day I haven't cracked it. My hunch is they mistook the organization for *World Affairs* magazine. Or maybe the guy just liked my fedora.

I returned to the Big Apple where I was hangin' my hat at the time, and went to see my old man to tell him the good news. He was a hotshot commercial photographer with a posh studio on Madison Avenue. At one point in our conversation he suggested I take a camera to the hearings. "Since you'll be in the room, you might as well take some shots. You can sell them."

*What?*

He pried open a dusty cabinet that hadn't seen daylight since the Hoover administration and pulled out an old Nikon F. He didn't use 35mm because, back then, print ads demanded large format. 35mm was the de facto standard for newspapers, but the quality was not

up to par for the slicks. The old man usually shot with 4 x5 Hasselblads and those giant 8x10 dinosaurs with their heads shrouded with black cloth. But they got the job done. The Nikon, on the other hand, was merely a paperweight.

I took the camera and held it, looking helpless.

"I don't even know how to use it," I said.

"It's easy," he replied. "I'll show you how to load the film."

So began a 15-minute crash course in photography.

Had I known anything about the medium, I would've gotten out of Dodge in a hurry. It was sheer ignorance and an overriding desire to be part of history that gave me the chutzpah to drape that SLR around my neck.

CUT TO: Washington, DC.

Outside the building, a crowd of the curious had gathered, along with protestors waving signs reading "Crime in the Suites!" and "Impeach Tricky Dick!" The Capital was shaking, and so was I as I stood in front of the witness table, guarding my position. I turned to aim the camera at some of the senators on the committee, focusing on the famous faces, warming up, so to speak, but not shooting. I'd already taken plenty of shots of the committee members in the preceding weeks. Besides, this was the era of film, and even though I wasn't packin' color (the Nikon was loaded with Tri-X, 36 exposures), it was expensive, and every shot had to count.

Suddenly there were murmurs in the crowd. The TV lights came on. The attorney general was entering the room, surrounded by Secret Service agents and a small band of high-priced lawyers armed with briefcases. True to form, Mitchell strutted through the entrance puffing on his trademark pipe. I don't think smoking was allowed in the building, but this guy was above the law—*literally*.

I found myself trapped in a vice between two beefy pros who elbowed and sucker-shoved me as we clustered around the witness table, jockeying for position. I felt like a high school bench-warmer thrust into an NFL huddle, only it wasn't a huddle, but more like a mugging. Motor-driven Nikons were whirring all around me, while I couldn't even fire a single shot. Just keeping my grip on the camera was tough enough as the competition muscled me out of the game.

As the shutterbugs tightened the vice, I felt my legs start to give. Bang—I was on my knees on the floor. It might all have ended then and there, but I didn't bite the dust. Instead, I aimed the camera up at Mitchell's face, focused, and fired. Click-click-click, until the roll was spent.

There was no telling what I'd captured that day. Would have to wait until the weekend when I returned to the city and handed the film to my old man to process in his darkroom.

As it turned out, I'd managed to nab some striking headshots of Mitchell—pipe in mouth, smoke drifting up into darkness thanks to a very high, unlit ceiling—looking as arrogant as ever. The portrait that was ultimately published was pure beginner's luck, of course. I had those pros to thank for knocking me down and giving me the perfect angle. The other photographers all remained standing, shoving their lenses in the subject's face. In other words, they all got the same shot, and close-ups of the guy's nostrils.

It was with this photo that my career as a photojournalist was launched. I started selling my shots on weekends to magazines and newspapers: *Rolling Stone*, *New York*, *The Village Voice*, and many others. But how could I miss? These publications couldn't get their own photographers on the scene and had to rely on the wire services. Thus, they were clamoring to get their hands on original shots they could byline. One mag actually paid me a grand just to hold three photos for a week, which they wound up not using. Talk about easy dough.

One morning walking through Grand Central Station past a newsstand, I spied two of my photos on the front page of *The Village Voice*. One was a shot of novelist Norman Mailer (see Chapter 3, Fig. 9), the other of John Lennon, both of whom had attended the hearings for a day as spectators. Below the photos was a credit with my name. *Wow*.

I wound up making a lot more moola from my photos than what *Crawdaddy* forked over for the cover story I wrote. It dawned on me that it might be wise to set aside the typewriter for a while and buy myself a camera. No Mickey Mouse job, either, but a top-of-the-line SLR, just like the big boys.

So that's what I did, and I began stringing for UPI, which was conveniently located just a few blocks from my apartment.

It was a wild way to start a career, and the lesson I learned from photographing Mitchell was the most valuable one of all.

Don't follow the pack.

Look for a unique angle, an opening, a view that nobody else has found. Or, as the Italian artist Nanucci wrote: *Always strive to find an interesting variation*.

Shoot for the pure thrill of it, and you'll wind up thrilling others. It's not about what camera you use—it's about your eyes and learning how to see, as if for the first time. Your vision, not mine, is ultimately all that matters.

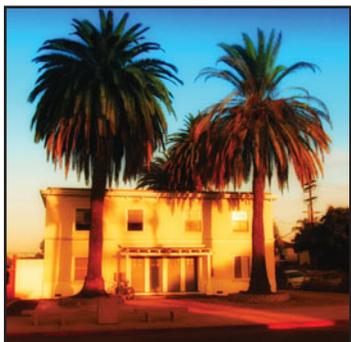
The rest, like Watergate, is history.

# CHAPTER 5 TWINKLE, TWINKLE LITTLE NOIR

## Ambient Light and Flash

*“A moon half gone from the full glowed through a ring of mist among the branches of the eucalyptus trees...”* —The Big Sleep

Shadow and light. What else is there in this crazy game called life? It's the Big Mystery, best as I can tell. Solve it and the game's over; you win. As for photography, crack the riddle of light and you've got it made in the shade, no pun intended.



What first attracted me to San Diego was the quality of the light. Sometimes alien and surreal, other times biblical, as garish as a Hollywood epic. I'm transfixed by the contrast between harsh desert sun and murky pools of shadow. Stalactite shapes, stark and edgy, or painterly, lantern-like, ambient light.

Lawrence Durrell's book *Spirit of Place* is about capturing the essence of a location. I'm trying to capture visuals that define a city's core. It's hard to get a handle on, and difficult to explain in textbook fashion. A poem would get you closer to what I mean. It's a subjective enigma, an "eye of the beholder" thing. It's what drives me to keep squeezing the shutter.

I'm not always successful in my quest. Sometimes the light is perfect but there's no subject in sight. Or that



perfect light fades before I've even taken out the camera. Light can be as elusive as a pickpocket on the 4th of July.

## AMBIENT LIGHT

While walking around my neighborhood one overcast day—perfect weather for making pictures—a Mediterranean archway presented itself. The soft light accentuated the texture of the facade, and a bird of paradise intruded like a blood-stained talisman (Fig. 1). Taking the photo felt like writing the first chapter of a novel without words. The digital frame I added gives the effect of a doorway into the picture. The viewer enters and follows the thread.



Fig.1. Omen (2009). Photo by Derek Pell.

Be careful when applying a digital frame. Make sure it complements the photo instead of hogging all the attention. I discuss both virtual and real frames in **Chapter 9, "I've Been Framed!"**

Fig. 1 is more interesting to me than the pretty sunset in Fig. 2 because it tells a story, or at least prods the viewer to imagine one. There's no story in the sunset photo. It's a cliché that can't match the majesty of the scene when you're standing there.

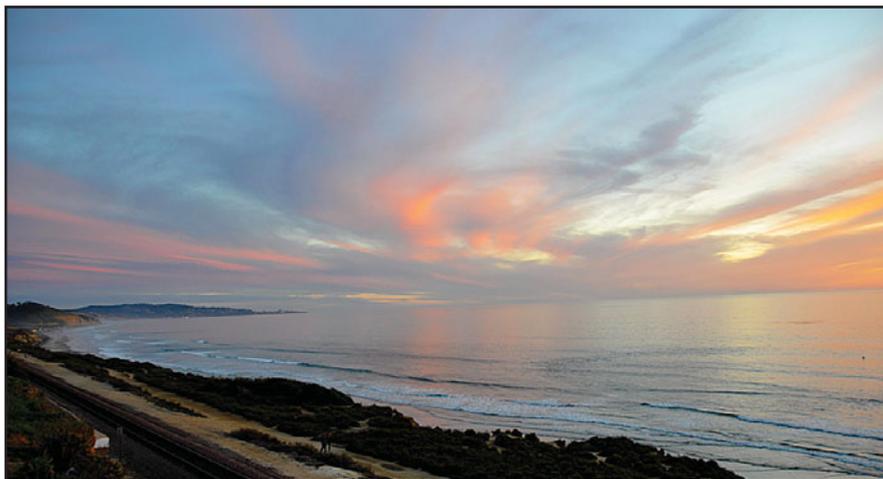


Fig. 2. La Jolla (2009). Photo by Derek Pell.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying you shouldn't shoot sunsets. What I'm getting at is this: Nice ambient light, in and of itself, doesn't make an interesting photo. The right light on the right subject does. So when you think about light, keep that in mind.

When I'm out to score some noir, shadows rise to the surface like shark fins. The fire escape in Fig. 3 is a case in point. The shadows are sharp as knives and convey a sense of drama with their Dutch angularity. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: A "Dutch angle" is a film noir technique where the camera is tilted to the side so that the shot is composed with the horizon at an angle to the bottom of the frame. It makes the audience uneasy.) Stare at the photo for a minute, and it's easy to imagine the shadow of some shapely gams rushing down the stairs pursued by a figure with a gun.

When taking a shot like this, exercise caution. It's easy to overexpose and blow out the highlights. Try underexposing 1/2 stop or so to preserve texture and retain detail in the shadow areas (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Dramatic natural light provides texture and knife-like noir shadows.

The photo was taken at high noon, with a brazen sun making trouble: mondo contrast. The exposure was 1/640 at f/10, ISO 200, zoomed to 27mm.

I converted the original from color to black and white in Photoshop to emphasize the noir feeling. But, usually, my brand of neo-noir likes a little color to bleed through.

In general, noir lighting is kick-in-the-pants high contrast and black shadows. It's the opposite of the soft, diffused light found in portraits. For fashion, well, the rules are always being broken by talented photographers and—right now—hard, flat lighting is hot. (I discuss ring flash later in this chapter.)



Fig. 4. Cropped detail showing the texture of the wall and detail in the shadows.

## IMAGINING LIGHT AND RE-CREATING IT

There might be times when you'll stumble on a location that whispers, "Go ahead, shoot me." But there's nothing there. You take a long, hard look and begin to sense something—the light's not great, but there's a potential image here. Then, slowly, it starts developing in your mind. You take a few shots and move on, but the excitement is growing and suddenly you can't wait to get to the PC and make the picture that wasn't there. Here's an example.



Fig. 5. Before (dull daylight snap).

Fig. 5 shows an office building on Coronado Island that whispered to me. There's nothing special about it; the architecture is mildly interesting but the photo is basically a dud destined for delete. So what's going on here?

Something about the stairs and that isolated door told me it could make a slice of noir. If only it were night...

Here's what I did to get the photo I saw in my mind (Fig. 6). I opened the image in Photoshop and selected the sky using the Quick Selection Tool. With the sky selected (and

some distracting trees in the background), I pressed the Delete key. Bye-bye daylight. Using the Color Picker, I chose a dark shade of blue as my foreground color and made the background color white. Inside the selection, I dragged the Gradient tool from top to bottom, creating a gradated night sky with a faint glow on the horizon (Fig. 6). The area to the right of the stairs was a distracting mess so, with Burn tool in hand, I made the area a solid shadow.

I made the entire building into a selection and used the Contrast slider to darken it. For the final touch I took the Dodge tool and

lightened areas around the door and the stairs so they appeared to be lit by an unseen source. Now the forbidding door became the focus of the photo. *Presto!*—twinkle, twinkle little noir.

The lesson: Take the time to *imagine* a photograph. Find the potential image in a photo that seemingly missed the boat. Available light doesn't always cooperate, so consider manufacturing your own.



Fig. 6. After (cool noir night).

## NIGHTTIME IS THE RIGHT TIME...FOR NOIR

Although he's not my favorite painter, Edward Hopper knew a thing or two about light which—if you could bottle it—I'd stand in line to buy. You might even describe some of his works as “noirish.” However, when I shot the photo in Fig. 7, Hopper wasn't on my radar, but just underneath. What I saw was almost an abstract. Like the *barristas*, most of the ambient light had gone home for the night, so this was a job for a portable flash. Only I didn't have one with me. And—*uh-oh*—no tripod, either. It was one of those bite-the-bullet moments when you say to yourself, “WTF, give it a shot...might get an interesting blur.”

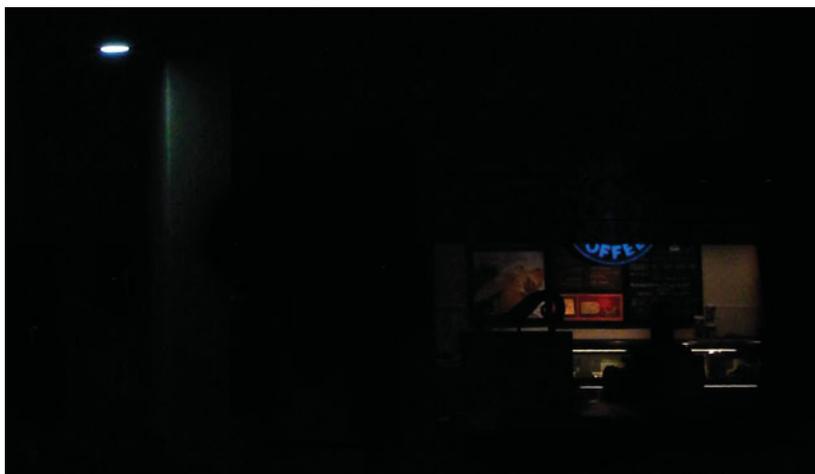


Fig. 7. Hopper's Cafe (2009). Photo by Derek Pell.

I tried to Zen myself as I braced the camera against a trash can, repeating the mantra, “I am a tripod, I am a tripod...” until I became rigid as a corpse, held my breath, and squeezed the shutter. 1/8 sec at  $f/5.6$ ; ISO 200. (I could've bumped up the ISO setting but, in this case, I wanted maximum clarity, minimum noise.) Only when I looked at the photo in Lightroom did I see a connection to Hopper's classic, *Nighthawks*. I liked what I initially saw: the glow of the neon coffee sign, the street lamp, the shadows. The composition draws the eye from upper left to lower right. In the black void

between, you expect to see a figure in a trench coat emerge... maybe a dame with a cigarette and heels. This was a still image that begged to be a movie, so I eventually used it as the background in a Flash animation. I added audio and the one visual aspect that seemed to be missing: swirling fog. You can check it out at [www.zoomstreet.org/thrill/flash1.htm](http://www.zoomstreet.org/thrill/flash1.htm).

I find a lot of shutterbugs are afraid of the dark. Maybe it's the long exposures that make 'em nervous, the sheer hit-or-miss quality of night. Or they're just too lazy to lug a tripod around. Big mistake. Put the camera to bed after sundown and you're missing out on a world of photographic opportunities. Night is when things start to get interesting. A whole new cast of characters takes the stage. Buildings reveal secret identities. Trees perform shadow plays. Cats, like extras, ham it up in alleys. Windows wink like flirtatious eyes.

With the sun turned off you've got a smorgasbord of illumination: moonlight, street lamps, headlights, and neon. Different light, different subjects, *different photos*. Fewer distractions, too. No flash? Up the ISO setting. No tripod? Rest the camera on a Fed-Ex drop box or the roof of a car. Hold your breath and try a hand-held (Fig. 8), or use blur for effect, like in Fig. 9.



Fig. 8. This noirish facade was shot hand-holding the camera, without flash. Auto White Balance accurately captured the color of the scene.



Fig. 9. Using a slow shutter speed produces the ghost-like blur of two pedestrians (1.0 sec at f/8.3).

## PORTABLE FLASH IS YOUR BUDDY



Flash was no pal of mine when I began shooting. It didn't fit my M.O. It was available light or nothing. Flash photos looked like flash photos, so forget it and, believe me, I forgot it. When digi-cams finally rolled around, they had their own little built-in pop-up flashes that were impossible to escape. Light too low?— *pop!*— you were flashing whether you liked it or not, and there wasn't much to like. Subjects looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights, or rats with rabid "red-eye." Not to mention those ugly shadows and solid black backgrounds...what the hell's *that* all about?

No subtlety, no style. Portable strobes were for crime scene photographers and the paparazzi mob. Even when I knew better (i.e., I saw how good flash could look when I used big studio strobes) I still avoided wireless portables. *Why?* Guess I didn't want to do the math, calculate the distance to subject, etc. If I had any talent for math I'd be an accountant.

When I finally got my hands on a review unit of the Nikon Speedlight SB-900, all that changed. It was like a barn door being thrown open in my brain. Flash was actually doable, flexible, powerful, *portable*. No math required, no cords to trip over. I could trial and error my shots and learn from experience.

I made a classic mistake the first time I tried to test-fire the strobe off the hot shoe in “Remote” mode. Everything looked fine, appeared to be working, the SB-900’s ready light was on, but when I pressed the shutter nothing happened. I called photographer Drew Wyeth and grumbled, “Must be a defective unit, huh?” He chuckled and asked, “Did you remember to pop up the camera’s built-in flash?”

Uh, no. (Doh!)

When you’re using a Speedlight untethered, as a wireless remote, *something* has to trigger the unit, and that’s where the camera’s built-in flash comes in. If you don’t put that little flash up, the Speedlight goes to Vegas.

I was on my own now, a tourist without a map . . . didn’t know Joe McNally from Rand; had never heard of legendary shooter David Hobby and his maniacal cult of Strobists. All I knew was that flash provided those double O’s that are the lifeblood of creativity: *options* and *opportunities*.

My first true test of the speedlight came on assignment for *Zoom Street Magazine* to shoot photos for a special “Noir Issue.” I was hanging my hat on Coronado at the time and scoped a retro coffee shop that looked like a promising location. I paid a visit to the cops and arranged permission for a sidewalk night shot. (It was quiet and out of season, so no “event insurance” was required.) The magazine’s DV editor (and former actor), Wendell Sweda, agreed to play the heavy. He drove down from Santa Monica armed with a fedora and a hard-boiled attitude. Alas, he forgot his trench coat, and there was no time for rentals. (Always pack a spare TC.)

We arrived on location late, leaving only about 15 minutes for the shoot. It was dark, the atmosphere dead-on, and no pedestrians were in sight, so there was no need to block off the area with crime scene tape. (Actually, yellow “caution tape”—a handy accessory available at any hardware store.) One minor flaw I hadn’t noticed while casing the joint during daylight: although it was late January, the coffee shop still had its Christmas lights up, strung along the facade’s Alamo-style roof. Oh well. I could clone out the holiday spirit in Photoshop.

Pressed for time, there was no elaborate setup...I had the speedlight mounted on the hot shoe of a Fujifilm S3 Pro. I rotated the flash head and bounced the light off a gold reflector clamped to a C-stand. I hand-held the camera and shot wide at 18mm (1/125 sec at f/5.6; ISO 100).

As you can see in Fig. 10, the strobe knocked out the puny illumination of the holiday lights, leaving just the scraggly cord. The Speedlight was so powerful, in fact, that its spill illuminated the interior ceiling. Feisty sucker.



Fig.10. My first shot using the Nikon SB-900 Speedlight.

Those dual spotlights above the lettering might've been distracting, but they actually worked within the composition because they echoed the subject's eyes. Credit, of course, must go to the model, whose range of menacing expressions would've made Orson Welles proud. In my experience, actors make the best models, but rarely vice versa.

For me the killer shot was Fig. 11.

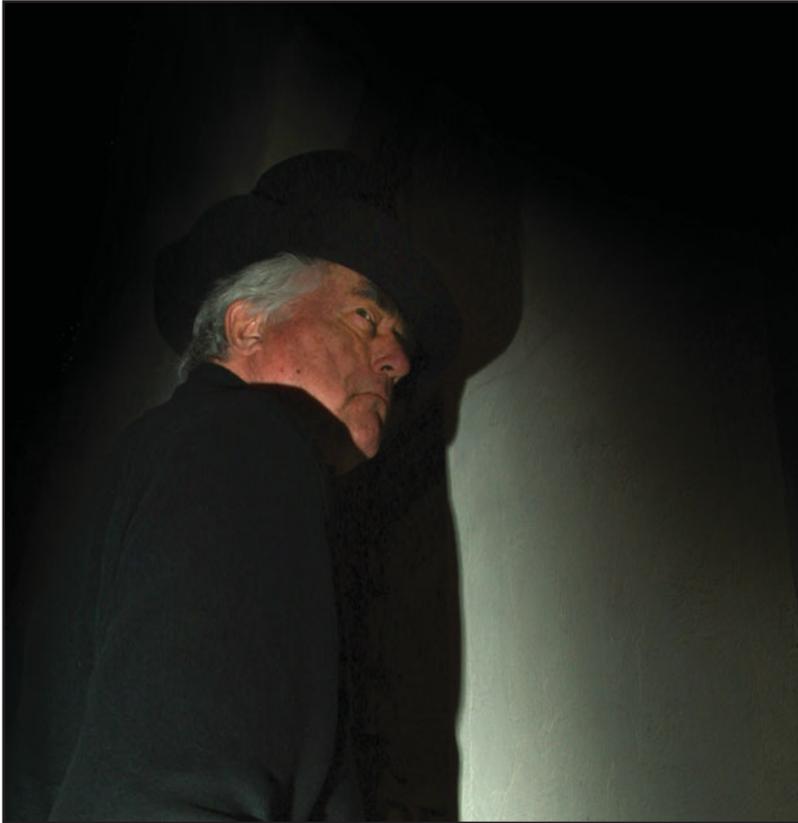


Fig. 11. One portable strobe produced this killer shot.

I dialed the SB-900 down to  $-1.16$  and again bounced the light off a gold reflector that was positioned at left just outside the frame. The light caught the subject's eye, threw a dramatic shadow, and revealed the stucco wall's texture. An incremental step up the power ladder would have overexposed the face and blown out the highlights.

But before you go calling me a genius, I gotta confess I didn't nail the perfect exposure off the top of my head or with a tape measure. It was the old T & E (trial and error). That's the beauty of the SB-900; you can quickly adjust the output via either a button or a dial. I fired a shot, checked the result in the LCD, adjusted the exposure, shot again—lather, rinse, repeat—until I had the light I wanted.

The SB-900 is packed with cool features. You can use it as a commander to trigger an entire army of Speedlights. (Talk about a power trip!) I like to keep things simple on location—one strobe and some reflectors. I leave it to guys like Joe McNally to conduct an orchestra of Speedlights and make a symphony out of light.

The SB-900's flexible flash head is a bouncer's delight; you can rotate it horizontally 180 degrees to each side and 90 degrees vertically. A lot of coverage!

Let's slip outside for a second while there's still light and grab some tests to illustrate adjusting the output setting.

In Fig. 12, the strobe is too bright and overpowers the ambient light.

Fig. 13 shows what happens when you dial down the setting one stop to  $-1.0$ . The mix of ambient/flash appears more natural.



Fig. 12. Too much flash power squashes the ambient light.



Fig. 13. Dial down the flash power until you get a blend.

Fig. 14 is a montage I made using a photo from the noir cover series and a shot of the moon, which I blurred in Photoshop. I wanted a grainy film effect, so I treated it to a heavy dose of the Add Noise filter, and then converted it to black and white. The most interesting part of the photo is that double shadow. I'd love to be able to tell you I intentionally lit the scene to achieve it but, truth be told, it was a gift from the Flash gods.



Fig. 14. Double Indemnity, anyone?

Nope, I can't explain it. Might have been the way the reflector was positioned, or maybe I inadvertently jerked the camera and wound up with a Buy One Get One Free. *Double Indemnity*.

## AN OUNCE OF BOUNCE = FILLS & THRILLS

Accidents happen; I just wish I could plan on 'em. What I *do* plan on when shooting exteriors is no roof overhead to bounce light off. That's why I carry reflectors, and so should you. I keep a Photoflex mini in a pouch attached to my gear bag that opens out to about 12 inches. I can hold it easily in one hand and the camera in the other, or—when shooting close-ups—give it to the model to hold at chest

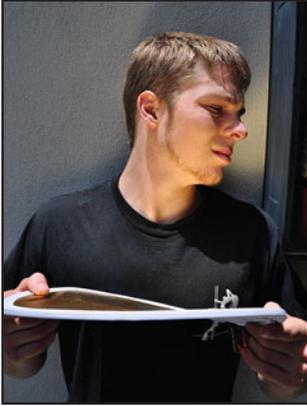


Fig. 15. Model with mini reflector.

level for fill light (Fig. 15). It's double-sided, white and gold. Gold is great for enhancing skin tones and adding warmth to a heartless desert sun.

The mini is made by **Photoflex**, which also sells a **MultiDisc Kit** (Fig. 16) that includes a circular 42" frame, 5 reflectors (gold, soft gold, silver, white, and translucent), a holder, and a stand. You get a big bounce and lots of flexibility, and you can put the reflectors wherever you want 'em. The holder has removable clamps and swivels into position.

I also use the **Photoflex Lite Panel Kit** (Fig. 17) for full-length portraits because it provides a rectangular swash of light. It comes with its own stand and doesn't weigh you down. I hate lugging a lot of gear around and am always trying to pack smarter and lighter. A good reflector is as essential as a tripod and a toothbrush.



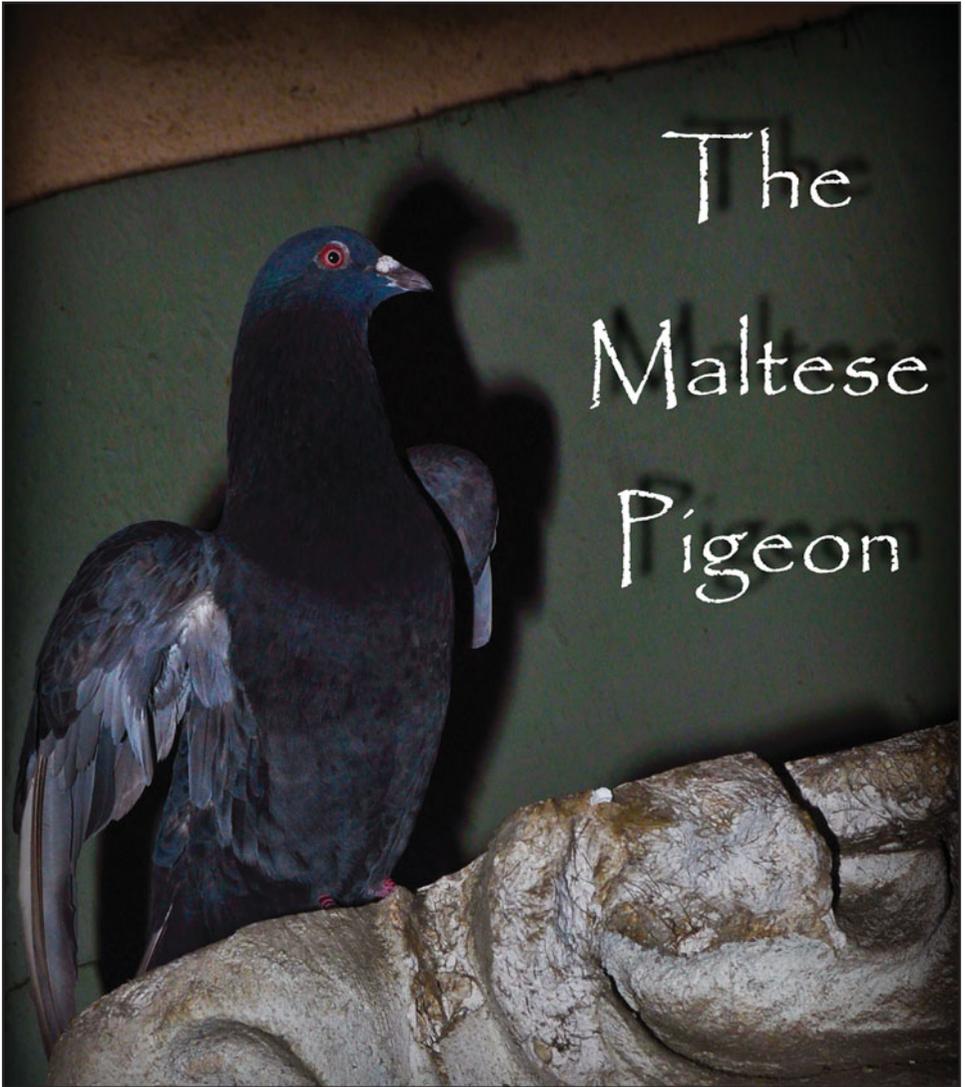
Fig. 17. Lite Panel Kit.



Fig. 16. MultiDisc Kit.

You can make do with white cards, sheets, shirts, foam board, aluminum foil. Haven't tried my underwear, but you never know.

I don't own stock in Photoflex. I'm plugging their products here because I've been using them successfully for years—they're reliable, well-made, durable, and the best bargain around. There are plenty of other good companies out there if you search, but if you're on a tight budget, go Photoflex. Trust me; it could be the start of a beautiful friendship.



Since I was born smack in the middle of Manhattan, you probably wouldn't expect this New Yorker to get excited about a pigeon... unless my revolver was in hand. Those "doity stinkin boids" are a dime a dozen and a pain in the butt. Well, maybe I'm gettin' soft in my old age. Here's the story. The other day I was lying around the office watching Bogart do his cool in *The Maltese Falcon*. It's one



of my favorite motion pictures. I should have been working on this book, but I wrote it off as “reference” and gave my secretary (Effie Perine) the day off.

Later that night I was on a case in Balboa Park, nosing around the museums, when I spied the specimen on the facing page. It was framed beneath a Spanish

archway, perched on a pedestal, posing like it had been waitin’ for me all its life—an omen. I glanced over my shoulder, half expecting to see Sam Spade standing with a cigarette and a smile on his lips. The bird gave me a look like it was about to blow town, so I had to act fast. The ambient light was murky, but I had an SB-900 mounted on the hot shoe. I dialed it down to  $-1 \frac{1}{3}$  EV (to try to preserve the texture and drama), spot-metered the eye, and fired at 1/60 sec at f/10 (ISO 200; 90mm).

A moment later it was gone, but I had the evidence on a memory card. For a hard-boiled dick, it’s the shot that dreams are made of. No digital retouching necessary. I added a “Dutch Angle” crop for good measure and poured myself a drink.

This red-eyed beauty had Silver Screen written all over it but didn’t leave a calling card (thankfully). So I tagged it “The Maltese Pigeon” and gave it a perch in this book.

Not bad for a boid.



## GRIDS, SNOOTS, GOBOS, &amp; CHIZZLERS



Fig. 18. Honl 1/4" Speed Grid.

They might sound like thug words, but they're 100% pure shutterbug slang for light-shaping tools. Except *chizzler*...I coined that to describe when I hold my hand in front of a strobe to deflect the light. I call that "chizzling," get it? It also happens to be the cheapest accessory I own. In fact, I own two of 'em.

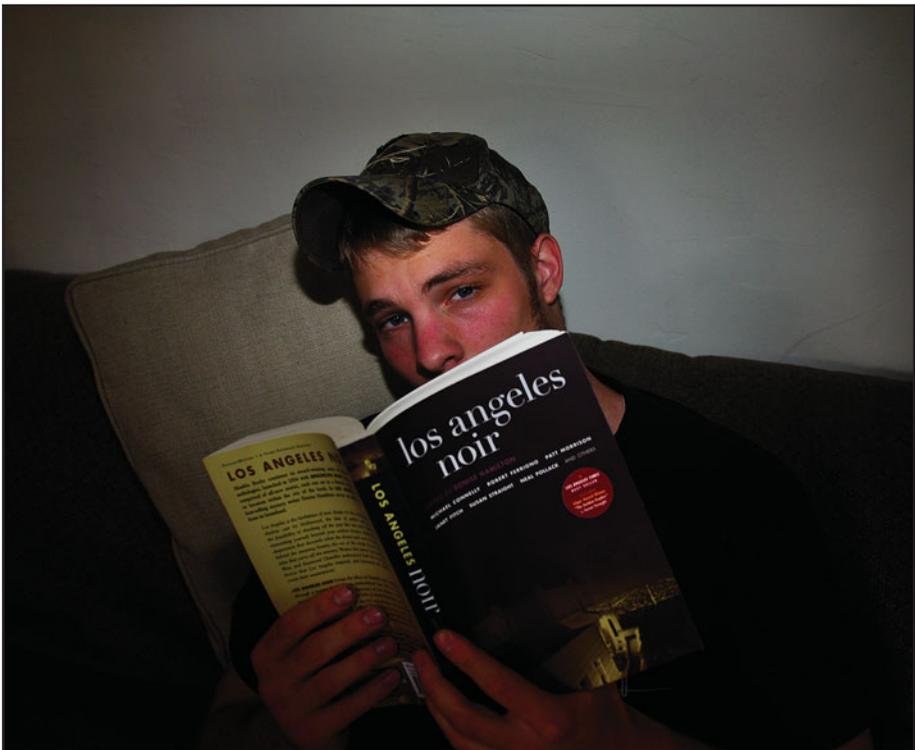


Fig. 19. A 1/4" Honl Speed Grid attached to my strobe head gave this shot some dramatic light.

So I gabbed about reflectors in the previous section, but in addition to bouncing light there are times when you want to *shape* it. You got to roll up your sleeves like a sculptor and start kneading away...molding the light...smoothing and shifting it into patterns and shapes. Throwing light on a subject to see it is one thing, but it's more fun to use light creatively in collaboration with the subject.



Fig. 20. Speed Snoot.

**Honl Photo** makes a bunch of great, dirt-cheap, light-shaping tools. I've been using the 1/4-inch **Speed Grid** a lot lately (Fig. 18). It attaches to your strobe via a Velcro **Speed Strap** that wraps around the head and forms the basis of the Honl System—a quick and easy way to swap accessories. The Speed Grid features a honeycomb pattern that produces a gritty oval of light around the subject (Fig. 19). It's quieter than a rusty barn door, too.

Another tool to investigate is the Honl 8" **Speed Snoot** (Fig. 20), which can be folded funnel-like to direct a spot of light where you want it. Use it to add a cinematic touch to a shot. Use it repeatedly, and you'll have to don a zoot snoot. Fig. 21 is a plain flash shot. Figs. 22 and 23 show the effect of the snoot, which can be modified with a twist or a squeeze.



Fig. 21. No snoot.



Fig. 22. Snoot shot #1.



Fig. 23. Snoot shot #2.

A **gobo** (a.k.a. a flag) is short for go-between, and it's anything you can find to stick between the strobe and the subject to modify the way the light hits. It could be a slab of stained glass, corkboard, chicken wire, black card stock, whatever. If the light doesn't cut it, cut the light with a gobo.

## A KNOCKOUT IN THE RING



The big thing right now in fashion photography—ring flash—is actually as old as the hills. Developed in the 1950s for dental photography—*smile!*—it’s aptly named because it’s a circular strobe.

You can always tell a photog has used it by a distinctive highlight in the model’s iris. A pal of mine calls it “the alien look,” and some folks hate it. Not, however, the ad agencies and clients screaming, “*Gimme that ring flash look!*” That “look”

boils down to a flat, hard, *in-your-face* light that softens shadows, erases wrinkles, and creates a slight glow around the edge of the subject so it pops out from the background. Ring lighting is hip, hard-boiled, and something a guy like me can really sink his teeth into, pardon the pun.

If you shoot fashion or portraits, you’ll want to consider adding a ring flash to your bag of tricks. The only drawback is cost; it ain’t cheap. But wipe that frown off your face because there’s an affordable alternative that turns your portable strobe into a ring flash. It’s called **Ray Flash: The Ring Flash Adapter** (Fig. 24). Fit one over the strobe head, and you’ll get the magic look. Because the Ray Flash isn’t a light source, it weighs a lot less than an actual ring.

There’s also no need for an external power source, so it’s a no-brainer for location use. Even sweeter, it doesn’t alter the color temperature of your



Fig. 24. The Ray Flash.

flash, so you don't have to stop and compensate. Fig. 25 shows a close-up taken with the Ray Flash. Notice the edge around the subject's face. Good separation from the background, too. In Fig. 26, I used the Ray Flash as fill light, and it did a nice job softening shadows on the model's neck.

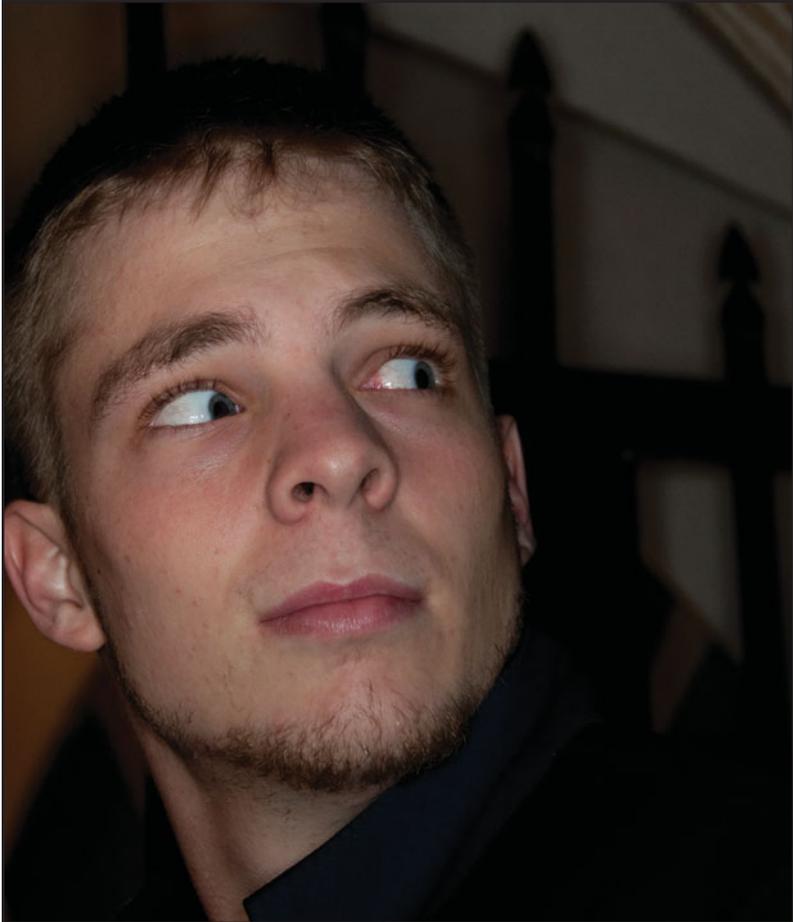


Fig. 25. The Ray Flash in action.



Fig. 26. I used the Ray Flash as a fill light in late afternoon. It softened the shadows on the model's neck and produced smooth skin tones.

If you've been intimidated by flash in the past or didn't see the need for it in your own work, here's what I hope you'll take away from this section. Portable strobes are fun. Hell, I'm no wizard juggling a dozen Speedlights—I've only begun exploring the damn things—but I'm learning new stuff every day. Even with limited experience, I've managed to take a few good shots for this book. That, in itself, should inspire you to test the waters. If a hard-boiled palooka like me can do it, just imagine what you can do.

## WHAT, ME POP-UP?

My D-SLR has an internal pop-up flash just like the ones found on cheapo point-and-shoots. Kinda cute, like a jack-in-the-box or a hood ornament. As I've already mentioned, the pop-up serves a purpose; i.e., it triggers the SB-900 off camera. Other than that, it doesn't get used much around here. I was actually feeling sorry for the damn thing, so I used it to take the night shot in Fig. 27. Did a good job freezing the swirling smoke from my cigarette. You might find the pop-up handy in a pinch when your portable flash ain't around. So be kind. Just don't make it a habit.



Fig. 27. Shot with a Nikon D90 using the camera's built-in pop-up flash.

## THE BIG GUNS: STUDIO STROBES



If you're thinking of lighting a blimp or a fleet of shiny new Buicks, you can pack that Speedlight away. You'll want to haul out some big guns—monoblocks, bazookas, Sherman tanks. It's all about power and how much light you want to blow on the subject. You're not gonna get 1,200 watts off a hot shoe.

I don't spend much time in the studio nowadays, but when I'm there, I use dinky 200-watt strobes. I've whittled my equipment down to the basics since I started using small flash. My entire set-up consists of just four strobes with umbrellas, a couple of softboxes, stands, and boom arm or two. I sold all my hot lights a few years ago. They're the ones that don't flash, just jack up the electric bill. As long as I can light a subject front, side, and back, I'm as happy as a clam in Okeechobee.

Last Halloween I decided to steal some shots of the neighborhood demons. I set a Fujifilm S3 Pro on a tripod in the living room and plugged in a strobe with an umbrella. I placed the light off to the side of the front door and hid another one outside in the bushes for side light. The door was kept wide open, and when the ghouls hit the welcome mat I fired. I was only able to take one shot per group because the brats were in the throes of sugar-shock and I was too scared to ask 'em to pose. My favorites in the series are Figs. 28 and 29. In the former, the strobe froze the hand in a surreal gesture. The light goes behind the masks to illuminate the eyes. The side lighting gives definition and sets the black costume apart from the dark background.



When October 31st rolls around this year, I'll be armed with a Speedlight and we'll see how the shots compare. My guess is they'll be pretty good.



Fig. 28. Trick or Treat (2008). Photo by Derek Pell.



Fig. 29. Photo by Derek Pell.

The Halloween series (about 15 shots in all) were made at  $1/125$  sec at  $f/4.2$  (ISO 100; 75mm). I varied the power on the strobes, between  $-3$  and  $-5$  stops. There's a lot of light flying around here, and I didn't want to blind the little buggers or make 'em look like Casper the Friendly Ghost.



Big strobes are used to light everything from small tabletop products to full-length fashion spreads. They have a distinct advantage over continuous lights when, for example, doing food photography. Hot lights can quickly turn a plate of gourmet cuisine into a pile of mush even a dog wouldn't touch.

Instead of spending your arm and a leg on hot lights, think about getting an inexpensive strobe kit, like one I use made by Smith-Victor: the **FlashLite FL110K Kit** (Fig. 30). It includes two FL110i monolights, two sync cords, two 60-watt quartz modeling lamps, two Raven RS6 6-foot black aluminum light stands, two 32-inch black-backed white umbrellas, and a spy-style attaché case to transport it all. I love these babies because they're ultra light and compact. They're also a snap to use and perfect for portraits. The monolights have 60-degree beam spread with variable power selection, full or 1/2, and they recycle in about two seconds. You can probably pick up the kit on the street for around \$300.

If you outfit yourself with a couple of speedlights and a small studio kit like this, you've got indoors and exteriors covered, and you can carry everything in your bare hands. As Charlie Chan might say: Walk softly, but carry big light in small case.



Fig. 30. Smith-Victor FlashLite Kit.



## COVER STORY

DATELINE—San Diego, CA. (July 3, 2009) Wendell Sweda made a return trip to this city from his hide-out in Santa Monica. It was to be a grueling shoot-out for the cover of this book. This time, however, he remembered to bring his trench coat, while I supplied the heat—a Chinese-made Saturday Night Special. Unfortunately, it was Friday night and the gun fell apart after only 10 minutes. No sweat; I had backups.

I came prepared, seven guns in all. I bought 'em the day before in a value pack at CVS—five bucks, marked down from \$9.99. I couldn't believe my luck. 4th of July weekend you'd expect 'em to jack up the price on squirt guns. It was a real steal, even if it wasn't real steel.

I reached into my bag and selected an orange-colored blaster to replace the dud but—lo and behold—during the break, Sweda managed to patch up the weapon. Don't ask me how; he must've been packin' Epoxy, which doesn't surprise me. The guy is always ready for the unexpected, especially when he's around me.

Our first location was under a mammoth Moreton Bay fig tree in Balboa Park, where I set up a 39 x 72-inch aluminum **Photoflex Lite-Panel**—a snap to set up, even in the dark. Unfortunately, I should've packed a sandbag, because a stiff breeze blew in just as we started shooting. This had the two of us shouting, lurching, grabbing, and hand-holding. (No, not that kind of hand-holding.)

I used one studio strobe that was powered by a **Tronix Explorer XT**. Powerpacks can cost well over \$1,000, but this beaut (made by Innovatronix in the Philippines) goes for less than \$400! I didn't need the strobe's umbrella because I was using the LitePanel for bounce. Wait a minute—I take that back—I sure could've used the umbrella when the park's sprinkler system kicked in and put an abrupt end to the session. (Personal best: Fastest Set Break-Down.) We retreated to my car parked across the street in front of a church. As I was loading gear into the trunk, I looked up at the building. Spanish Revival; red clay mission-tiled roof, whitewashed stucco walls, two side staircases lit by lanterns casting a noirish glow.

I mounted a speedlight on the camera's hot shoe and had Sweda take a position on the staircase, gun in hand. He stuck an unlit cigarette in his mouth and I lay on the ground. I told him to point the gun right at me as I skewed the camera angle. In the viewfinder I saw a mob hit man. I was about to take my last shot on this earth. Didn't matter that the gun he held was green, I knew what color my blood would be. I told him to fire, then squeezed the shutter... [1/60 sec at f/4.0, ISO 400. Post-production: High Dynamic Range.]

Later, I put the flash away and shot the shadow in Fig. 31. Pure ambient light from a lantern provided a rich orange tone. I was gonna crop out the green barrel of the water pistol but decided to leave it in. Why be gunshy?



Fig. 31. A lantern's orange glow helped make this an effective shot.

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